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SUBJECT: CODEL SCHWARTZ (HDAC) VISITS GEORGIA

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¶1. (U) Summary and Comment: In support of its ongoing partnership with Georgia's Parliament on democratic and institutional reform (reftel), CODEL Schwartz and the House Democracy Assistance Commission (HDAC) visited the Republic of Georgia from December 17-19, 2008. CODEL Schwartz met with Parliamentary Speaker David Bakradze and multiple Parliamentary Committees, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Finance, and President Saakashvili. Wide ranging meetings covered Georgia's security, economic recovery efforts, IDP situation, domestic political events, and European cooperation. CODEL Schwartz also visited the town of Gori, a focal point of Russia's August invasion, where they were updated on events in the area by the governor and the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) field office commander. The overarching theme of the visit was that Georgia's security needs to be assured and the GOG must continue to implement democratic and good governance reforms. Pursuing further democratic and economic reforms will provide for continuing economic growth and enhanced security. Georgian officials expressed thanks for USG assistance and hope for continued cooperation with HDAC. End Summary and Comment.

HDAC RETURNS TO GEORGIA

¶2. (U) The House Democracy Assistance Commission (HDAC) -- represented by HDAC Chair Rep. Allyson Schwartz (D-PA), Rep. David Dreier (R-CA), Rep. Adam Schiff (D-CA), Rep. Donald Payne (D-NJ), and Rep. Bill Shuster (R-PA) -- returned to Georgia on December 17, 2008. (Note: HDAC's last visit took place in February 2008 (reftel) End note). HDAC continues to help the Georgian Parliament become institutionally stronger and become a more independent branch of the Georgian Government. In conjunction with the CODEL, two staff-to-staff meetings were held between Parliamentary and HDAC staffers. Prior to meetings with Georgian officials, the Embassy Country Team and USAID Democracy and Governance office briefed the CODEL on current events. During their visit, HDAC presented a new server and computer equipment to Parliament (worth 60,000 USD), to improve Parliament's computer network and information processing capabilities.

PARLIAMENT'S INVESTIGATORY COMMISSION

¶3. (SBU) CODEL Schwartz spent December 18 in Parliament meeting with individual members and committees. Parliament's Ad-hoc Committee to Investigate the August Events, including Chairman Paata Davitaia, briefed the CODEL on the Committee's findings. Davitaia explained that he and others had used Congress' 9/11 Commission as an example when formulating the Committee and its makeup. They noted the committee questioned 22 senior Georgian Government officials, including President Saakashvili. Davitaia focused on the committee's finding that the GOG needs to make institutional changes to create a more systematic approach for both dealing with the Russians and their role in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Davitaia,

himself an opposition MP, explained how unprecedented such a committee was in the countries of the post-Soviet space. The CODEL agreed and commended the committee for their professionalism and work.

PARLIAMENT'S FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

¶4. (SBU) A smaller group which included Reps. Payne, Dreier, and Schiff met with the Foreign Affairs Committee. The Georgian MPs explained that Georgia's success as a small, increasingly democratic state threatens Russia by demonstrating a viable alternative to its autocratic government. They explained their goal of further integrating Georgia into the west, specifically into the EU and NATO. The members acknowledged that further reforms are needed to achieve these goals, namely in the judicial system. They explained their desire to use assistance money strategically for infrastructure projects, notably a southern route for vehicle traffic from Batumi to Tbilisi which would strengthen Georgian security and provide closer commercial links with Armenia.

PARLIAMENT'S DEFENSE AND SECURITY COMMITTEE

¶5. (SBU) Concurrently, Reps. Schwartz and Shuster met with the Defense and Security Committee, chaired by MP Givi Targamadze. Schwartz said the CODEL was in Georgia not just to ask questions, but to "work together and create a dialogue." Both Representatives wanted to know how the Parliamentary Committee would use the information from the Investigative Committee to strengthen Georgia's defense and improve its security. Targamadze replied that the Government does not have much time and must quickly address these issues. He said that Georgia's strategic documents are being rewritten to account for the experiences of August, and that ineffective personnel had been dismissed from the Ministry of Defense, including the Chief Officer of Defense (CHOD), and former Defense Minister Kezerashvili himself. MP Akaki Minashvili (now the new Chairman of Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee) added that a

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"Trust Group" of five MPs exists, which has access to all MOD documents and information. Targamadze said Georgia needs to develop its Officer Corps and purchase new equipment to assure Georgia's defense, but that both require funding. Unless Georgia's security needs are met, he said that "it is impossible for Georgia's economy to develop."

THE ANTI-CRISIS COUNCIL...

¶6. (SBU) The CODEL next met with the Anti-Crisis Council (ACC). The ACC was established in the aftermath of the August invasion. The Council consists of MPs and several non-Parliamentary opposition figures. Chaired by opposition MP Gia Tortladze, the Council briefed the CODEL on its recent initiatives, including increasing political programming and media freedom, and reforming the election code. Tortladze said the opposition's overarching goal is to restore checks and balances in the government, as well as the rule of law.

...AND THE OPPOSITION

¶7. (SBU) CODEL Schwartz followed the ACC by meeting the larger Parliamentary opposition. Leader of the Christian-Democratic Movement faction, Giorgi Targamadze (no relation to Givi), echoed Tortladze's goals. Furthermore, he said the country needs stronger regional political parties, and not new elections. Elections now, without substantial reform of the election code, would produce the same results. Davitaia, also leader of the Powerful Georgia faction, noted that the opposition in Parliament is cooperating on multiple initiatives, and not just via the ACC (which includes majority members). Davitaia said the opposition will soon introduce bills on tax breaks for IDPs, improving the criminal code, and restoring political party financing. The opposition members agreed that they have much work remaining. One example is Parliament's Chamber of Control (similar to the GAO), which they said must be made independent from executive branch influence. Vice Speaker Levan Vepkhvadze concluded that Georgia is far from a perfect

democracy, but it is not a classic authoritarian state. Most of the opposition MPs agreed that they had joined Parliament to improve Georgian democracy constitutionally. They are encouraged by the constructive engagement they have experienced in Parliament, and duly credited Speaker Bakradze for this engagement.

SPEAKER BAKRADZE AND VICE SPEAKERS

18. (SBU) Speaker Bakradze and five Vice Speakers met with the full CODEL. Bakradze gave the group an overview of his assessment of the current situation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia saying that Russia is trying to use its diplomatic levers to legitimize its recognition of both breakaway regions. Bakradze stressed the importance of allowing access for international observers in the breakaway regions as the only way to reduce tension. Bakradze expressed his desire to have more working level committee-to-committee parliamentary exchanges with HDAC. The Speaker outlined his commitment to pursuing further democratic reforms and creating an inclusive political environment. He praised the work of the Ad-hoc Investigatory Committee, noting that it has set a new democratic precedent that will be hard to change. Bakradze told the group about plans to launch a new political channel (similar to C-SPAN) in Georgia in the near future. .

GORI: SECURITY SITUATION STILL TENSE

19. (SBU) On December 19, the CODEL traveled to Gori, which lies 60km west of Tbilisi and just 15km south of South Ossetia. Gori was bombed by Russian planes and missiles during the August invasion, and was invaded and temporarily held by Russian and South Ossetian forces. The CODEL met with the commander of the field office of the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM). The commander said that the situation is mostly calm in his sector, although he detailed numerous shooting incidents and attacks over the previous two months. He lamented that the EUMM still does not have access into South Ossetia, nor cooperation from South Ossetian or Russian military officials.

110. (SBU) The CODEL then met Lado Vardzelashvili, Governor of Shida Kartli region and lead government official in recovery and IDP assistance efforts. Vardzelashvili recounted the August invasion for the CODEL, and his efforts to evacuate the city and surrounding villages. He regretted that the government was not fully prepared for the conflict, but was grateful that the Parliament's Ad-Hoc Investigatory Committee allowed the public to judge the government's actions for themselves. Now, Vardzelashvili said improving the security situation is the number one problem facing his region and constituents. Meanwhile, he continues to work on providing humanitarian assistance to IDPs. After leaving Gori, the CODEL met with several English teachers, themselves IDPs from the recent war. The CODEL then visited one of the 5,000-plus homes the Government has built for the war's IDP families.

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MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

111. (SBU) The CODEL met Foreign Minister Vashadze on December 19. Vashadze hailed the Ad-hoc Investigatory Committee as a watershed moment and that the MFA was looking to implement some of its recommendations, namely having better coordination between Georgian embassies abroad to be able to present more cohesive diplomatic responses in times of crisis. Vashadze warned that Russia would block any attempts for monitoring missions to enter Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the near future. Vashadze opined that Russia's position was ultimately untenable as it needs western capital, expertise, and its own wave of democratic reforms if it wants to secure its own economic prosperity.

MINISTRY OF FINANCE

112. (SBU) First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance Nick Gilauri gave the CODEL an overview of the economic situation in Georgia before and after the conflict. Gilauri stressed that the GOG's priority is to ensure the care of the most vulnerable section

of its population. As such, he detailed the GOG's plan to increase social spending and dramatically decrease defense spending. He indicated his desire to move forward on a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the United States, which resulted in a lively discussion on all sides about the possibility of such an accord. Concluding the meeting, all sides agreed to continue discussions on a Georgia-U.S. FTA.

PRESIDENT SAAKASHVILI

¶13. (SBU) In their final meeting, CODEL Schwartz met with President Saakashvili over dinner. The discussion focused on the economy, democratic reforms, parliamentary development, and the August conflict. Saakashvili stressed that, while Georgia has not faced a banking collapse like some of its neighbors, the economic situation is difficult. Congressman Dreier mentioned his interest in advocating for an FTA. Saakashvili thanked him, and stressed the importance of such an agreement for the Georgian economy, as well as for the message it would send to the larger region. Saakashvili noted that he is moving ahead on democratic reforms, which is something the Russians can't understand or counter. The CODEL congratulated him on the recent investigatory commission as unprecedented in the FSU. Regarding the opposition, Saakasvili pointed out that those who chose to take their seats in parliament are gaining in popularity, while those who refused their mandates have seen their poll numbers plummet. Saakashvili shared his belief that only President Bush's speech in the Rose Garden stopped the Russian invasion. He added that the Russians' current strategy is to keep Georgia off balance by creating instability in and around the separatist regions. In a move that was pure Saakashvili, the president had the restaurant bring a television set to the table to illustrate to the CODEL that press freedom is alive and well in Georgia.

¶14. (U) Representative Schwartz has cleared this cable.

TEFFT